

Moral and Ethical Development in Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy: A Holistic Approach to Education

Neetu Kashyap*
Assistant teacher
department of basic education
Shahjahanpur, U.P. India

Abstract

This paper examines Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of moral ethical development and its significance for education. Aurobindo's model, unlike most traditional approaches, embodies all three areas of growth—spiritual, intellectual, and emotional—allowing for inward self-discovery as the substructure for outward moral action. This study explores his view of the human soul, the psychic being, and the significance of education to awaken the moral consciousness. The study compares Aurobindo's model with contemporary functionalist models of moral education, and offers ways to translate Aurobindo's vision in practice, by proposing a much more coherent and integral moral education model for both the student and the teacher.

Keywords: Moral and Ethical Development, Sri Aurobindo, Education, Philosophy, character education.

Introduction

Even then, moral and ethical education has been a core concern for individuals and societies. The focus on moral development in education has, historically, expressed itself in different ways, from character education and virtue ethics selection models to social justice-oriented approaches. The guidance for moral and ethical development provided by Sri Aurobindo is unique in its spiritually based standpoint that moves beyond social awareness and intellectual constructs. At the core of personal evolution in his educational philosophy, which is focused on integral development, is moral and ethical growth. Moral development in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy is not an external imposition but a profound inner evolution born out of the awakening of the soul. This paper explores how his vision on moral and ethical education fits into his own pattern of human development and spiritual evolution.

* Corresponding Author: Neetu Kashyap

Email: nkkashyap84@gmail.com

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Sri Aurobindo's Vision of the Human Being: The Psychic and Moral Growth

The Psychic Being and Its Role in Ethics

Integral evolution is defined as physical, vital (emotional), mental, and psychic and is the foundation of Aurobindo's philosophical framework. The most important process in this development is the so-called "psychic being," the highest aspect of the individual, his divine element. Psychic being guides the person's evolution, causes his inner growth, liberation, independent of outside pressure or social conditioning. While Western moral theories and philosophies tend to emphasize rational principles or utilitarian outcomes, Aurobindo lays the groundwork for the evolution of consciousness, which as the basis of ethical behaviour. The psychic being, as the true soul, is naturally in line with values such as truth, compassion, and justice. As it wakes, the person starts to operate from inner wisdom, a higher moral compass.

Moral Development as Evolution of Consciousness

For Aurobindo, moral development equalled the evolution of consciousness. He calls humans a transitional species, and said they are gravitating away from mental consciousness, and toward a higher spiritual consciousness. The psychic being gradually expresses itself, it helps the lower parts of the being—the physical being to surface, the vital being to surface, the mental being to surface. Aurobindo posits that ethical development cannot be achieved through intellectual training alone. Rather, it requires a transformation of the inner nature, whereby one's desires, emotions, and thoughts become aligned with the deeper truth of the psychic being. Thus, moral education in Aurobindo's view is not about learning societal rules or ethical theories, but about facilitating the soul's emergence as the guiding force in one's life.

Comparing Aurobindo's Ethical Philosophy with Contemporary Moral Theories

Rationalist and Deontological Ethics

Much of modern moral education draws from rationalist traditions, where ethical decision-making is based on reasoning and universal moral laws, such as Immanuel Kant's deontological framework. In this view, moral principles like justice and fairness are objective and can be deduced through rational deliberation. Aurobindo's philosophy, while recognizing the importance of reason, moves beyond it. He argues that reason alone cannot grasp the fullness of moral truth, as it is limited by the constraints of the mental plane. For Aurobindo, ethical conduct cannot merely be an externally imposed intellectual exercise; it must be born from spiritual awareness that goes beyond mental deliberation. Through its connection to the divine, the psychic being becomes the true source of moral clarity underpinning the process, transcending the boundaries of reason and ego.

Following in the footsteps of classic utilitarianism, models of ethics such as those proposed by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill emphasize the outcome of actions, viewing the moral goal of actions as one which maximizes happiness or well-being for the most significant number of people. So this is a results-oriented strategy, not an intentions- or principles-based one. Aurobindo critiques consequentialist ethics as being overly wedded to outside outcomes and not sufficiently aware of the inward purposes animating the person. For him, the only true moral action cannot be determined by a calculation of benefits but be spontaneous expression of the inherent goodness of the soul. When the psychic being rules in us, the right act is spontaneously the most ethical one, because the moral calculus that requires weighing consequences is no longer there.

Virtue Ethics

There is a much closer alignment between Aurobindo's thinking and virtue ethics that stresses the importance of moral character and virtues like courage, temperance and wisdom. Similar to virtue ethicists, Aurobindo thinks moral conduct comes from the cultivation of inner characteristics instead of adhering to rules or weighing consequences. It is because Aurobindo's idea of moral virtues stretched beyond the idea of personality traits. Virtues need to be cultivated, he argues, not only intellectually or socially but must issue from the psychic being's action on the rest of the personality. In Aurobindo's vision, virtue is an expression of the divine nature present in everyone, and the purpose of moral education is to awaken and cultivate this divinity.

Educational Implications of Aurobindo's Moral Philosophy

Educational philosophy of Aurobindo focuses on inner development of the students. This stands in opposition to the more standard way to teach moral principles, instructing students didactically or through moral reasoning exercises. Rather than prescribing ethical behaviour on an individual basis, Aurobindo emphasizes the importance of educators creating environments in which students can connect to their psychic being, which will naturally allow moral and ethical qualities to flourish.

This means, in practical terms, doing such things as practicing meditation, doing self-reflection and making things in a creative way that enable students to be quiet in a way that they can listen with their inner ear. By encouraging the mood of inner calm and self-awareness, educators can help build up a student's inner moral compass which Aurobindo argued was a better guide than rules imposed from the outside.

Role of the Teacher as a Guide

Aurobindo does not see the teacher as one who forces his knowledge or value upon the student, but as one who directs the student towards identification with his true self. Here, the teacher is less an imposing figure than a guide to inward exploration. Aurobindo's model echoes contemporary student-centered pedagogies that prioritize autonomy and personal development. His philosophy also goes a step further by making it clear that the ultimate objective of education is to help the students access their own divinity, and act accordingly. Morality is thus not so much imposed externally as self-realized.

Challenges and Applications in Contemporary Education

Challenges of Implementation

One of the prime difficulties in manifesting Aurobindo's vision in 21st-century school systems is that the social and curricular structure of innovation pays no regard to inner development, thus not allowing the same direction of evolution to take place in students. We are just beginning to build the paradigm for spiritual and moral education, which can often be neglected because modern education focuses so much on quantifiable knowledge, science, maths etc. Moreover, Aurobindo's model mandates teachers who are in touch with their own inner development, able to help students walk the path of self-discovery. This puts a distinct challenge upon teacher preparation programs, which must incorporate spiritual and ethical training along with conventional pedagogy.

Applications in Holistic Education Models

Nonetheless, Aurobindo's vision has been implemented with success in several schools, especially at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education in Pondicherry, India. Thus, this institution has Integral education which relates to all aspects of the individual including psychic being. For the students, classes include practices like meditation, arts, and various forms of self reflection, allowing students to explore their inner nature. Aurobindo's beliefs also tapped into contemporary movements in education, such as social-emotional learning (SEL) and mindfulness in schools. There are many approaches that acknowledge the significance of inner awareness in the development of empathy, moral behavior, and emotional regulation, much like Aurobindo's philosophy.

Conclusion

A transformative vision of education from the lens of Sri Aurobindo on moral and ethical development. He suggests that the awakening of the psychic being, along with the evolution of consciousness, offers not only a spiritual basis for ethical conduct, but a basis that rises above traditional moral theories, which would begin from reason or social standards. Aurobindo's educational philosophy promotes acting in the field of ethical action as a byproduct from sight in the inner light of the soul when they have developed their inner self and realized their true selves. Despite the difficulties of realising his thoughts in modern education systems that mainly centre on external measurement, his foresight may provide timely wisdom for alternative, more holistic, spiritually based approaches to moral development. With education's growing need to relate not solely to intellectual but also to emotional and much more so to ethical strata of the human experience, Aurobindo, it seems, lives on as a relevant and inspiring basis for humanity's future.

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